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- 1 After building a socio-political background on Fredric Jameson's late capitalist postmodernism, Michel Foucault's "biopolitics," Herbert Marcuse's "automatization" of social life and György Lukács's "abstract" and "concrete" potentials, Alex Houen investigates in his work *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (2012) the main political and technological events which have had a decisive impact on cultural production since the 60s in the U.S. Since Vietnam War, Cold War, space exploration, automation and the revolution of media communication technologies a sense of immense "potentiality" has been released in tandem with skepticism over capitalism's impact on cultural production and over the automated nature of human experience. It is Houen's aim to investigate how this new "potentiality" is translated into experimentation with language, form, syntax and genre. He brings together Allen Ginsberg's anti-war, mantric poetry, LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka's reactionary anti-white hate-speech, William S. Burroughs's "space age mythologies," Kathy Acker's poetry of abjection as well as Lyn Hejinian's language poetry as instances of experimental – rather than avant-garde – literature which manage to inspire a sense of "potentialism" through the performativity of their language.
- 2 In chapter one, Houen studies Allen Ginsberg's mantric poetry and his "auto-poems," as manifestations of such "potentialism." Within a love-and-hate relationship binding together avant-gardism, consumption, popular culture and the American State, he traces

Ginsberg's initial experimentation with the affective force of "mantras," and his gradual resort to audiotapes, the automobile and other popular media. Ginsberg's "mantras," which are spiritual, breathing and chanting techniques, become a form of exercise for his body as well as activism against the war. Houen delineates how his poems and his body gradually merge into one, constituting the physical form where his free consciousness resides. "The Change" in his *Collected Poems* (1984) welcomes his "physical shape" in his verse: "I am that I am I am the/ man & the Adam of hair in/ my lions This is my spirit and/ physical shape I inhabit (328). In his "auto-poems," a form of autobiography that combines already spoken taped speech acts recorded while on the road, his main concern is "autobiographical lyricism in relation to the networks of automated industry" (Powers 31). The poem which is the medium of expression resembles now the vehicle he was driving in. However, in "Wichita Vortex Sutra," the separation of self from the reality of the poem and of the war is complete: "'understand that the Self is not a void'/ not this, not that/ Not my anger, not War Vietnam/ Maha Yoga a phantom/ Blue car swerves close to the bus/ – not the self" (455). For Houen, "[t]he strength of Ginsberg's mantric speech acting lies in the way it turns poetic potential into an affective, aesthetic power" (Powers 36). By mingling poetic language forms with automated counter-lyric utterances and pushing the limits of language, form and mediation, he brings about new possibilities of expression through form and novel ways of using this expression to combat institutionalized practices.

- 3 By contrast to Ginsberg's spirituality, Baraka, inspired by Malcolm X's Black Power movement, calls for a violent break from White American society and the creation of new cultural potentials for Blacks. Drawing on Lukacs's distinction of "abstract" and "concrete" potentials, he works for a change of the "objective reality" for the Blacks. His political and cultural activism characterizes his poetry, which experiments with performance "rituals" and improvisation with Jazz music in order to bring out the immense potentiality of the Black race. His new aesthetic, enriched with black images, is intended as a cultural and racial force and its affective power comes from anti-white hate-speech poetry as expressed in the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus: "[...] Come up, black dada/ nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape/ (*Transbluesency* 98). Although in an interview Baraka argued that "art is the most beautiful resolution of energies," intended to offer catharsis (qtd. in Powers 75), Houen shows how his plays become an actual battlefield of racial attack. They demonstrate the performativity of the hate-speech that separates blacks and whites and stress the absurdity of the misconceptions held by whites against blacks. In *Dutchman*, White Lulu verbally attacks twenty-year old Black Clay: "You think I want to pick you up, get you to take me somewhere and screw me, huh? (79). "You look like death eating a death cracker." (79). "You tried to make it with your sister when you were ten." (80). Yet, the transformation of Clay into a possible murderer later on hints at the power of that absurd White talk onto the Blacks: "I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat" (96). Houen is right when he points out two tendencies in his cultural production. While other poems and plays show "a spiritual anti-materialism that fused 'energy' and 'possibility' into a distinctly aesthetic force" (83), when experimenting with form, syntax and accepting influences from Ginsberg's mantras and the Futurists, other works tend to be products of political activism that use militant violence.
- 4 While the performativity of Baraka's linguistic potentialism aims to create "concrete realities" for Blacks, Burroughs's literary potentiality takes the form of escapism from real world and the body. In chapter three, Houen investigates Burroughs's

experimentation with cut-ups and fold-ins of texts which open up the potential of alternative living through the practice of reading. The method of taking texts apart, recombining them and exploring the new potentialities that stem up, creates new voices in the text and a more fluid textual experience for the reader. As textual exploration enables spatio-temporal exploration, the text and the words are put in orbit around the reader, creating alternative realities, and the text takes the form of a hybrid vehicle that guides the reader into other realities. After the Nova trilogy, in his second and more mature *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy, he is still working for a counter-cultural revolution, potentiating new historical and social realities, despite his exhaustion with anti-narrative techniques. At a time when talk of setting up space communities is common in the U.S., Burroughs moves towards more complete transmutation in *The Western Lands* (1988). The new hybrids, which are offered as “blueprint hybrids, potentials rather than actual separate beings, capable of reproduction” (42), create further connections between textual and alternative life-forms. His *phenomenological* approach to the readerly and writerly process is underlined and his potentialism lies in the creation of narratives which offer alternative liberating realities through reading. “Well, that’s what art is all about, isn’t it? All creative thought, actually. A bid for immortality” (165).

- 5 For Acker, who was very much influenced by Burroughs, fiction is not a way of escaping the body but it is the means through which gender and sexuality can be redefined. As Houen sees it, the potentialism in her work lies in the power to combat biopolitical management through the “languages of the body” (19) by combining imagination and history and by resorting to taboos and abjection. The author successfully traces her experimentation with language and the self which leads to her poetry of abjection. Acker’s *allobiography*, her substitute for autobiography, pictures her effort to escape the social gaze which controls the body, by escaping the “I” in her writing and by forming fluid narratorial identities, places and time (152). Similar to Burroughs’s fiction, her dream narratives open up to new possibilities. Instead of suppressing dreams, as Freud’s theory suggests, she neutralizes them in order to propose new gender roles that escape psychic and social censorship. The fact that for Acker social bondages and familial love are highly incestuous is also emphasized while her sexual revolution is taken as the harbinger to her political revolution regarding issues of abortion which she saw as another way for the state to exercise control and power over man. Accepting influences from Donna Haraway and William Gibson, she drives the body into coexistence with cyborg. Her return to the body and the text is marked in her pirate myths as the abject through which she explores established social, familial, economic, political relations, creating affective potentials. More importantly, though, what connects Acker with the other writers analyzed in the book is her concern with the writing and reading process. In the *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), “tattooing” (134) resembles the processes of writing and reading while the body becomes the text. Instead of writing about the body she writes the body as she writes the text. It is seen as a body which she violates with words which are viruses like AIDS.
- 6 Houen continues his investigation of the experimentation with language and the self by moving on to the Language poets and Hejinian. He marks their engagement in social discourse and their rejection of easily consumed poetry, as a reaction to the era’s “politics of impossibility” (Powers 197). Contrary to Acker’s abject body, and to Ginsberg’s political verse, Hejinian’s potentiality comes from within the linguistic medium which builds “alternate possibilities” (Powers 232) by means of parataxis, switching subjects, voices and

contexts, stressing the variability of the signifiers rather than its unquestionable exchange for a signified. While in all the previous writers' work the experimentation gave rise to an affective, aesthetic or sociopolitical potentialism, in Language poetry potentiality lies with the reader. The role of the author in this construction is also problematic as their literary production is paralleled to the assembly lines of car production through "multiauthored processes rather than single-authored invention" (Watten 135). The affective role of Hejinian's poetry is effected through "defamiliarization" or "estrangement," which the Russian Formalists also exercised, while possibility is explored through form. She is against conventional syntax and emphasizes openness of the text to the readers. An interesting case is *My Life* (1987), where the movement and dynamics of the "poetic prose" is created by hidden patterns of images, sounds, colors and syntax, without any unifying contexts: "A moment yellow just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of getting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he has left, was purple..." (7). These patterns link "language, memory, and experience ... as a dynamic form rather than a static fact" (Powers 205). Hejinian invests in this openness of the text which constitutes its possibility as it awaits the next sentence: "Let's say that every possibility waits" (7). "An other is a possibility, isn't it. (*Life* 41). The problems of agency and the poetry's relation to the reader and to the social context is compromised in Hejinian's poetry with the construction of "a "person," of fragmented subjectivities through writing, a subject which becomes object upon reflection. In *The Cell* (1992) the action of "patrol" stands for reflecting the self from "outside" as an object while the fragmentation of the verse is similar to the fragmentation of the self: "Do you patrol? outside the / self? around a body and/ the follicle in which it/ stands?/ Or cell? (55).

- 7 All in all, the study's extremely broad scope makes it a demanding read. Yet, although Houen undertakes a risky endeavor to draw the interconnections among writers who do not belong to a common literary group or era, he successfully manages to shed light on the way they have been striving for liberation of the self from social and political constraints of the time through the rejuvenated potentiality of the written text. Central in his study are the writers' ways of looking and constructing the self while in the writing process. Oscillating between spiritualism, hallucination, cultural activism, social critique and militant politics, Houen focuses on how they keep a critical stance towards the writing process as well as mass media before resorting to them for the projection of their experimental work.
- 8 In the concluding section, Houen's study is further informed by philosophical inquiries concerning the performativity of language, its affective power which can instigate real or unreal emotions and the relation of affects with possibility and social reality. At this point, although his return to Aristotle's theory of catharsis and to Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime might seem untimely, it could be taken as proof of the timelessness of the affective role of literature. Last but not least, by providing more examples of other experimental writers, such as Antonin Artaud, Ezra Pound and Samuel Beckett, Houen re-opens the issue of potentialism in literary writing and forwards possible constructive dialogue on the issue.

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